

Gender Discrimination against Women in Yemeni Proverbs

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Abstract

Proverbs have always reflected considerable social, cultural and practical significance. They acquire their importance as social and cultural traditions, practices and even determinates of individual as well as collective social attitudes. Proverbs also obtain worth and value as indicators of gender power relations between male and female community members. Through language and with its help, proverbs could showcase how a woman in any particular human community, for instance, is portrayed, represented, socially perceived and treated, and very likely stereotyped by the male component of that community. Hence, the current research study investigates Yemeni proverbs with relation to women. In terms of its methodology, the study adopts and follows a feminist critical perspective to examine traditional representations of women in the Yemeni proverbs under question. It more particularly negotiates the image and status of Yemeni women as represented through such traditional words of wisdom. The study assumes—and accordingly argues and demonstrates—that women in the Yemeni traditional heritage of proverbs are stereotyped, discriminated against, and sometimes even humiliated in a variety of ways.

Key Words: Women, Yemeni Proverbs, Image, Gender Discrimination

التمييز المبني على الجنس ضد المرأة في الأمثال اليمنية

ملخص:

لقد عكست الأمثال دائماً أهمية اجتماعية وثقافية وعملية كبيرة. وذلك أنها تكتسب أهميتها باعتبارها تقاليد وممارسات اجتماعية وثقافية وحتى محددات للمواقف الاجتماعية الفردية والجماعية. كما تكتسب الأمثال قيمة كمؤشرات لعلاقات القوة بين الجنسين بين أفراد المجتمع من الذكور والإناث. ومن خلال اللغة وبمساعدها، يمكن للأمثال أن توضح ، على سبيل



المثال، كيف يتم تصوير المرأة في أي مجتمع بشري معين وتمثيلها، وفهمها ومعاملتها اجتماعيًا، حيث من المحتمل جدًا أن يتم تقديمها في صورة نمطية من قبل العنصر الذكوري في ذلك المجتمع. ومن هنا فإن الدراسة البحثية الحالية تتقصى ذلك في الأمثال اليمنية المتعلقة بالمرأة. ومن حيث منهجيتها، فإن الدراسة الحالية تتبنى وتتبع منظوراً نقدياً نسبياً لدراسة التمثيلات التقليدية للمرأة في الأمثال اليمنية محل البحث. كما تناقش الدراسة وبشكل خاص صورة ومكانة المرأة اليمنية كما يتم تمثيلها من خلال هذه الكلمات التي تمثل الحكمة التقليدية. وتفترض الدراسة - ومن ثم تجادل وتثبت - أن المرأة في التراث اليمني التقليدي للأمثال تتعرض للتنميط والتمييز، بل وأحياناً الإذلال بطرق متنوعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المرأة، الأمثال اليمنية، الصورة أو النمط، النوع

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage of any people—across space and time and with its elements and components—is a background frame that shapes the social character, individual behavior, and everyday attitudes of the people of that culture. Such cultural heritage manifests itself in a diversity of forms such as traditions, beliefs, myths, proverbs, literary productions and the like. Any social community must thus have its own cultural legacy and social pillars that necessitate its members to abide by. Such cultural and social commitment by human individuals, however, comes with little or no concern with or reflection over the validity, authenticity, futility, use, worth, value and outcomes of such cultural and social norms. An individual member of a human community habitually heeds less whether these norms are good or bad, positive or negative. Nonetheless, such social principles, norms, restrictions, etc., usually make up the foundation upon which the socialization process of development, growth and change is based.

In view of that, social customs and traditions usually control and dominate over the mentality of their human inventors and practitioners alike in a way that makes them an official constitution at the time in which they have been said and established and for much later and longer times yet to come. Such forms—proverbs included—of social and cultural heritage are—mostly unconsciously though—deeply rooted in the collective mind of society. In terms of establishing ground, endurance and symbolic indication, proverbs “are based on accumulated experience and transmitted from generation to generation; they reveal many hidden aspects of a

people's culture and way of thought. Proverbs reflect the realities of the moral fiber of the societies they belong to," (Dzahene-Quarshie 128). As such, they impact people's way of thinking, and are transmitted through different ways and methods.

Proverbs in particular and some other social traditional peculiarities in general are transmitted either orally; passed down from one generation to another as they are narrated by grandfathers and grandmothers to their grandchildren, or could be shifted officially in written forms. It can as well be observed that these social and cultural forms could also be passed down and recorded through literature; poetry, arts, stories, plays, proverbs, sayings, and the like. In all cases, proverbs reflect human cultures and originate in human experiences and practices until they eventually earn the status of human lessons, values and possibly quasi-beliefs.

In view of that, the current research study aims at exploring the gender discrimination against women as reflected in the Yemeni cultural heritage represented in the form of proverbs. It will also investigate the actual position and state of being of women in Yemeni society as manifested in these traditional Yemeni proverbs. Therefore, the current study attempts to address the following questions;

- What are the Yemeni proverbs that clearly show gender discrimination against a woman?
- In what sense do Yemeni proverbs show discrimination against a woman?
- What is the perception and consequent image of a woman in Yemeni proverbs?

Therefore, the current research study gains paramount importance as it touches upon a sensitive area of research and investigation. As it examines the status of women as represented by proverbs through Yemeni culture and social history, its findings would assumingly form a reliable social study for future researchers to enrich this area of study from different angles. Besides, based on its findings and recommendations, government competent authorities keen on improving the status of Yemeni women, international organizations and other concerned bodies interested in women's studies would get a clear picture of how Yemeni women are surrounded by gender lore that can be seen clearly in the Yemeni society through Yemeni proverbs. The study might then hopefully invite the attention of such bodies to the status of women, and possibly provide them with a moral push to double their efforts in nurturing Yemeni women, eventually putting an end to such harassing persecution and helping them recover from such prolonged sufferings.



In addition, the current study will attempt to demonstrate the dominance of masculine culture upon women in Yemeni society as recorded through certain social and cultural forms of traditional heritage such as Yemeni proverbs and sayings. The present study will thus tackle a very important social issue related to women as this issue is culturally rooted in the Yemeni society and is manifested in the widespread and prevalent use of Yemeni proverbs. The study therefore critically illustrates how almost all the Yemeni proverbs that deal with or focus on women are found to devalue and degrade women in their morality, creativity, mentality, etc. The study will also dedicate a final fragment of its investigation section to the presentation and discussion of some Yemeni proverbs that glorify or value women. However, such proverbs are allegedly found to be too rare to be addressed in a separate and independent study.

2. Background of the Study

Almost all nations and cultures have their cultural background in the form of proverbial heritage. Proverbs are the drawn conclusions of human experiences and wisdom originating in practically recurring human practices. It is no wonder then that proverbs as a concept and social phenomenon are among the frequently and well-studied textual genres. That is why proverbs have been the subject of numerous scholarly studies from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including sociology (Asimeng-Boahene, 2013), feminist critical discourse analysis (Diabah and Amfo, 2015), cultural studies, literature (Hussein, 2005, 2009; Jayawardena, 2015), and philosophy (Gyekye, 1975).

Although proverbs are widely regarded as a worldwide genre, they are classified as traditional or cultural in their description. Like any other literary genre, proverbs have more often than not—particularly recently—been recorded in a written form. Unlike most literary genres, proverbs are frequently recognized and practiced as oral traditions that enable us to know many things about the culture of any community. Proverbs are like a mirror that reflect the cultural character and social norms of any society. As far as the relation between proverbs and culture is concerned, it is worthwhile to identify how proverbs are defined in a particular cultural context.

In her paper entitled “Gender and Power Relationships in the Language of Proverbs: Image of a Woman”, 2015, Sarwet Rasul stated that “the New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy (Third Edition, 2002) defines proverbs as short, pithy sayings that reflect the accumulated wisdom, prejudices, and superstitions of the human race,” (53).

For further elaborate definitions of proverbs, a proverb has also been defined as follows:

A proverb is an expression which, owing its birth to the people, testifies to its origin in form and phrase. It expresses what is apparently a fundamental truth – that is, a truism, – in homely language, often adorned, however, with alliteration and rhyme. It is usually short, but need not be; it is usually true, but need not be. Some proverbs have both literal and figurative meaning, either of which makes perfect sense; but more often they have but one of the two. A proverb must be venerable; it must bear the sign of antiquity, and since such signs may be counterfeited by a clever literary man, it should be attested in different places at different times. This last requirement we must often waive in dealing with every literature, where the material at our disposal is complete. (Rasul 53)

Accordingly, a proverb is supposed and/or expected to indicate a certainly considerable degree of truth, authenticity and obligation. It should as well communicate a certain amount of antiquity. Such qualities of a proverb—in addition to the other qualities mentioned earlier—are what possibly encourage human individuals to unquestioningly embrace proverbs, make a proverb gain a special significance and cause them to have an impact over the lives and perceptions of human community members.

Though also written and recorded in a written form as stated above, proverbs are mostly received as a type of oral literature. As such, they convey a brief message based on a story, observation, or wisdom. It is hence stated that proverbs are “a short expression of wisdom or guidance that has gone into popular use,” (Al-Zubeidi 2). According to the Columbia Encyclopedia, proverbs are “more personal than aphorisms, and they frequently use metaphor, alliteration, or rhyme to communicate common experience,” (Columbia Encyclopedia 39701). Additionally, a proverb is defined, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs, as “a traditional saying that imparts guidance or delivers a moral in a concise and pithy manner,” (Speake iii). They could also be defined as “a short presentation of an apparent fact that has, had, or will have currency among the public,” (Meider 4). In that vein, it becomes more obvious and more comprehensible how a proverb is not simply a traditional saying that endures time and change, but is also an indicator of rich experience, an outcome of original life lesson and thus a proverb is of certain significance.

Proverbs are therefore “based on accumulated experience and transmitted from generation to generation; they disclose many hidden features of a people’s



culture and way of thinking,” (Storm 168). Proverbs are also considered “a paradigm for cultural studies,” (Grzybek 227). They help us trace the cultural traditions that are or used to be common among either present or past nations, or both for that matter.

As a cultural form, proverbs carry a large set of values, principles, and morals that shape the cultural character and social attitudes of the people of any particular human community across time and space. Proverbs are as a consequence a tool for preserving cultural identity. In his article “The Impact of Proverbs on one’s Character”, Mr. Amjad Dahmat stated in AZZAMAN.COM, (2019), that “it is known that customs and traditions are a reflection of the history, culture, civilization, and knowledge of a society, and are formed as a result of the experiences of its members, and with time, they acquire a kind of stability and sanctity that makes the process of changing them or not adhering to them very difficult.” Accordingly, proverbs gain their power and acquire their significance not just as traditional sayings that are frequently passed from one generation to the next, but also as influential determinates of cultural and social attitudes and practices in actual and everyday life.

In view of all that, proverbs can be found to cover all walks of life; agriculture, livelihood, man and woman’s roles in life, marriage, cattle, etc. They express a life experienced by an individual or a group of individuals in a particular place and time. Proverbs, as a result, eventually form and construct the individual as well as collective memory of that particular people and greatly affect their cultural and moral character and common attitudes either positively or negatively or both.

In this regard, the Yemeni cultural heritage is no exception; it is not distant from or alien to other nations. Yemeni culture is also abundant with traditional forms of all sorts. In terms of proverbs, Yemeni cultural heritage is equally as rich for it is loaded with proverbs that potentially represent a traditionally cultural base and social background that could be observed, heard and practiced in everyday life situations. As a member of this community, you can hear people every here and there and every now and then recall and pronounce some common proverbs within a variety of life professions and aspects such as business affairs, marriage, home affairs, education, and the like. Through the totality of such diverse proverbs nevertheless, a keen observer could sense the domination of a man upon a woman and male-female gender discrimination to be very common in Yemeni society and culture.

As seen in Pierre Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination*, we have taken on the historical structures of the masculine order in the shape of unconscious perception and appreciation schemes by being included, as men or women, in the thing that we are seeking to understand. So, it is possible that we will turn to dominant ways of cognition while attempting to understand masculine domination. He adds that "the androcentric view imposes itself as neutral and does not need to be explained in discourses geared at legitimizing it", which is perceived as the strength of the masculine order, (Bourdieu 32). Consequently, proverbs—in addition to demonstrating gender discrimination exercised against women—would also help us comprehend that such gender bias is regularly originating in male domination over women.

Such male-female domination is, interestingly enough, apparent and exercised in the sexual division of labor as well. In such instance, male domination over and discrimination against females generates a highly rigid allocation of the occupations given to each sex, of their place, time, and tools; and as a result serves as an enormous symbolic machine in the social order that works to validate the masculine dominance on which it is founded.

In addition, male-female working place domination further extends to the arrangement of home space, with a certain antagonism between the two genders at home, which typically belongs to women though. Male domination over and discrimination against female at the place of assembly or market, which classically belongs to men, is taken for granted and fully manifests itself between the masculine half and the female part. Moreover, male-female panoramic and binary state of being encompasses nature, too, presumably privileging the male component; the stable, the water and vegetable reserves; the pattern of time, including the day and the agricultural year, or the cycle of life, with its male moments of rupture and the protracted female gestation periods.

Within the Yemeni context, Yemeni proverbs have always been present vigorously and in a nature of diversity. Proverbs on men and women clearly show the space and the role that a man and a woman has and/or should have in social activities. Going through some Yemeni proverbs/sayings, one comes to realize the amount of male domination, oppression, sometimes violence, and discrimination that a Yemeni woman suffers from and is subjected to. It could be observed that some, if not many, common proverbial expressions are commonly used in different situations in which a woman is used to exemplify disgrace, humiliation, degrade, and the like.



For example, in many daily linguistic situations, one often comes across and hears different proverbial expressions that score or disdain someone's behavior, speech, walking style, and so on and so forth. As a case of illustration, through the variety of women-degrading proverbs, you could scorn or belittle the value and worth of someone's speech by simply commenting, stating or describing it as *kalam Niswan*; meaning "women's words, speech, promises". Likewise, to disdain someone's behavior or way of walking you could equally say "women's behavior or walking". To the contrary, if you want to show interest, approval and reliability of one's speech, you could simply say *Kalam rejal*; meaning "men's words, speech, promises". This indirect comparison between man and woman clearly suggests that a woman is of a lower rank, has bad behavior, talks in a bad manner, lacks integrity and credibility; and does not enjoy reliability, etc.

3. Methodology

The current research study follows a feminist approach to investigate and analyze the particular representations of women in the Yemeni proverbs selected for analysis. In terms of definition, feminist criticism is difficult to define because it has not yet gained a unified form or been codified into a single critical perspective; there is still an unresolved issues with women of color, minority women and lesbians, for instance, as not being represented by or included in the current feminist perspective. Therefore, feminist criticism or approach takes several shapes, follows directions and varies from one country to another, even from one critic to another.

Yet, almost all feminist critics unite in the assumption that Western culture is fundamentally patriarchal as Simone de Beauvoir argued in *The Second Sex* (1949) argued. We could also venture saying that Eastern Culture, perhaps to a lesser extent, is patriarchal as well. Hence, east or west, women are regularly stereotyped and misrepresented, which in the long run has created an imbalance of power between men and women and marginalized women and their contribution in almost all walks of life.

Therefore, feminist critical approach is a theory of criticism that is concerned with the status and position of women in society in all respects and at all times. It assumes that women have long been subjected to stereotypical and negative representations, and consequently unjustly mistreated and misperceived. Hence, feminist criticism investigates the ways in which literary and cultural productions help enhance or weaken the different kinds of oppression and forms of bias exercised upon women; be they economic, political, social, cultural,

ideological, or even psychological ones. Though comes within and is received through various and different views and opinions, feminism still addresses important issues and deals with serious subjects.

Accordingly, almost all feminist critics share certain common and important assumptions. The key assumption is that patriarchy oppresses women economically, politically, culturally, socially, and psychologically. They assume that a woman, in all domains of patriarchy, is an 'other'; she is objectified and marginalized. Another assumption is that all Western (Anglo-European) civilization and literature are deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology: female monsters in Greek mythology, Eve as the origin of sin and death in the world etc. Feminists, such as Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (1970), also share the idea that biology determines our sex (male or female), while culture and society determine our gender (feminine or masculine).

Besides, all feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal, the intention and plan to change the world by promoting women's equality. Eventually, all feminists hold the view that gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including literature.

Feminist criticism is highly sensitive to all forms of discrimination between man and woman. The pronoun 'he', for instance, some suggest is a masculine ideology to make men and what they do as the standard for all. Some suggest that it is an attitude and practice that has been greatly embedded in culture.

In recent perspectives, however, women recently have new feminist horizons; they advocate certain practices that used to be stereotypes of women and upon which women were subject to criticism. For example, the traditional rule of a woman was to love a man, be a wife, stay home to raise kids and take care of her family; as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), have argued in their book. A woman had also to comply with social acceptance philosophy including being committed to a particular dress code. Recently, however, feminist advocates and thinkers have no problem adhering to all abovementioned practices, yet remaining feminists.

In view of all that and based on the nature of the topic under investigation, the researchers of the current study will adopt the feminist approach to accomplish the study at hand. They will go through as many relevant studies, researches, books, journal articles as possible, etc., even those written in the Arabic language to grasp the core of the issue of Yemeni proverbs concerning the position of women as



reflected by them. The image of women as presented in Yemeni proverbs will be deeply investigated through feministic lens and perspectives in an attempt to figure out why, and demonstrate how men dominate over and discriminate against women; hence creating a stereotypical image of women. In a fully non-prejudiced and an unbiased effort, the study will methodically adhere to objective approaches in presenting to readers the state, image and position of women in Yemeni proverbs, within the framework of feminist perspectives nonetheless.

4. Literature Review

The issue of gender discrimination against women has been the study area in the recent two decades by many scholars in different parts of the world. Researchers have been discussing the issue from different perspectives and within various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and others. (Sarwet Rasul 2015, Ranjha 2020, Lahore 2021, Benedicta 2020, and Mumali 2021) are some of those researchers. They have explored the position of women through a variety of cultural forms like literary forms, proverbs, famous sayings, etc. They have sought to find out the actual state of women with relation to the stereotypical image established for women within different cultures, religions, writings, and so on. However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, the issue of gender discrimination against women in some Yemeni proverbs has not been individually addressed or given that much space and focus it deserves and is supposed to get by scholars and researchers.

Uzma Rani and Mazhar Iqbal Ranjha (2020) have explored the multiple identities of men and women and power relationships in English proverbs. They divided the obtained proverbs into three sets; the first set of proverbs for men, the second set of proverbs for women, and the third set of proverbs involving both genders. Using the 3D model of Fairclough to analyze the proverbs, they concluded that those proverbs related to women show a clear patriarchal attitude against women by presenting women as a burden, sexual object, and fragile. On the contrary, those proverbs involving men are explicitly celebrating the male gender and nominating it to own the world.

Benedicta Adokarley Lomotey and Sewoenam Chachu (2020) attempted in their study to explore gender ideologies and sexism, and the way that men and women are represented in European Spanish and French proverbs. In their study, they could find more similarities than differences after analyzing the proverbs under discussion. Similarities—according to them—could be attributed to the

universal perspective in understanding how humans behave since these two Romance languages share a common ancestor language.

In her thesis entitled “Depiction of Women in Swahili and Arabic Proverbs”, (2021), Mumali Henry Karakasha tried to explore how Swahili and Arabic proverbs inscribe perceptions of femininity and masculinity in respective societies, and attempted to demonstrate the cultural values that the Swahili and Arabic proverbs have established towards women. After analyzing the data being collected, Karakasha found that women are depicted with images of passivity like weakness, wickedness, parasitic existence, unintelligent agency, etc. Nonetheless, she also argued that despite the pervasive negativity observable in Swahili and Arabic proverbs in the depiction of women, there is some ephemeral but positive acknowledgment of women in several proverbs.

5. Gender Discrimination against Women in Yemeni Proverbs

In this paper, the researchers will explore the Yemeni proverbs concerning gender discrimination in general and some Yemeni proverbs with the nature of gender discrimination against women in particular. The researchers are supposed to deeply investigate the gender ideologies or what we can call gendered proverbs in Yemeni society, typically those referring to females, as they, even when they mention males, often critically expose the subjugation of women concerning male superiority.

Based on the commonly spread and prevalent sayings and proverbs, men in Yemeni society, as in many other Arab societies, feel that they are intellectually, morally, and socially superior to women. They are frequently considered as being stronger, more intelligent, and having more leadership qualities. Through such proverbs and sayings, men are also shown to have the ability to give security, nourishment, and livelihood in their life more than women can do. As a result of such cultural misunderstanding of Islamic instructions and proverbs inherited from one generation to another, Yemeni females are usually socialized to accept their male counterparts as wiser and naturally more capable leaders.

Males gain authority and wield it at all levels of decision-making in their societies as a result of these socialization processes as well. Men tend to use and exert this power in the context of community development by dominating all aspects of decision-making throughout the process, including inception, development, implementation, monitoring, assessment, and feedback.

Under all these forms of Yemeni cultural heritage, such popular and gender proverbs have emerged, and Yemeni women could not succeed in establishing



themselves in a well-respected social position in the society. A research report, Oct.2016, on Yemeni women during the conflict suggests that “women bear the burdens of running the households under extreme stress and are often exposed to different forms of gender-based violence,” (Care International 1).

5.1 Some Yemeni Proverbs that Communicate Gender Discrimination (GD) against Women in the Yemeni Society

Gender Discrimination (GD) among diverse human societies has become one of the most central issues of many recent studies carried out by many scholars in different research centers all over the world. Researchers in this field have always tried through the study of such traditional and cultural forms (proverbs) to catch the established image of a woman in comparison to a man. In more cases, a woman has always been the victim of such discrimination from different perspectives. A woman has more duties and obligations to fulfill than a man does. She works as a mother, a worker, a farmer, a children’s breeder, etc. Hence, a woman works harder and longer for her daily livelihood, especially in underdeveloped countries.

In Arab societies in general and Yemeni society in particular, as a patriarchal society, man is always looked at as a provider, protector, source of income, symbol of honor, pride, manhood, strength, and the like. As opposed to a man, a woman is looked at as the agent of consumption, a source of evil, iniquity, and shame; an incapable, weak and inferior being, and so on. In her article written and published in the Arabic Language, and titled “Woman in the Yemeni Public Proverbs” 2019, Belqis Mohammed Alwan mentioned some Yemeni proverbs that show the hegemony of masculinity upon a woman in Yemeni society.

For example, there is a popular proverb that says “*Alwalad Sharha walaw dhahr wamat*”: (الولد شرحة ولو ولد ومات); the boy is the source of cheerfulness and joy even though he was born and died). The second proverb says “*walad Asi Afdhal min Ashr banat mutiat*”: (ولد عاصي أفضل من عشر بنات مطيعات); a disobedient boy is better than ten obedient girls). The third proverb says “*Alwalad Janah wa albint wanah*”: (الولد جنة والبنت ونه); a boy is paradise, but a girl is a heartbreak).

These and other similar Yemeni proverbs clearly designate a lower and degrading social and cultural status of a woman in the Yemeni family and by extension in the Yemeni society as well. Some international reports have stated that Yemeni society has been proven to practice the worst forms of patriarchal dictatorship against women. The MENA (Middle East and North Africa) organization has reported that “a woman is unable to decide to marry, irrespective

of her age, and only her legal guardian (father or any male in the family) has the authority to do so on her behalf,” (MENA-OECD 18). The report has also added that child marriage is allowed just before the age of 18. The same report has stated that female victims of violence are not able to report such cases of violence seeking justice, especially if family members are involved, for reasons of family honor and fear of being mocked at and disdained by social members and for fear of feelings of disgrace.

For the full image of gender discrimination against Yemeni women, the researchers have collected the following proverbs from different sources:

- 1- “*Ibn alibn ibni, Ibn albint no; lahm alkabsh yokel lakin lahm alkalb la*”: (ابن (الابن ابني اما البنت فلا، لحم الكبش يؤكل اما لحم الكلب لا ; i.e., the son of my son, ‘a nephew on the father’s side’, is my son, but the son of my daughter ‘a nephew on the mother’s side’, is not, (Al-Athwari). The son’s or brother’s son is compared to a sheep’s meat ‘mutton’ that is Halal and thus eatable in Arabic and Islamic cultural and religious traditions and beliefs. In contrast, the daughter’s or sister’s son is likened to a dog’s meat that is Haram ‘prohibited’ and hence is not eatable. This Yemeni proverb could serve as an archetypal example of many other similar proverbs that are gender-oriented in their discrimination against women on various levels.

Going deeply to analyze the deep meaning of this proverb, we come to realize that this proverb carries nasty discrimination against women, and at the same time, glorifies and exaggerates the importance of man. The son’s son stands for pride, joy and blessings; he is a most welcome being and is recognized as an integral and natural member of the family. The daughter’s son, on the other hand, is a bad omen; would be ill-fated on his grandfather and thus is neither welcome nor recognized as a member of the family. The son’s son is compared to the sheep’s edible meat, but the daughter’s son is compared to the dog’s inedible meat. Again, the proverb suggests that the son’s son is a well-being and the source of glory, goodness, honor, etc. However, the daughter’s son is the source of evil and is a son no more.

- 2- “*Alfarkh yasih min albidha*”: (الفرخ يصيح من البيضة); i.e., the male chick screams from the egg). Farooq & Al-Athwari (2020).

In this proverb, the male human being ‘boy’ is compared to the small male chicken ‘chick’ that screams before the egg hatches; unlike female chicks that have no sound during hatching. The proverb carries inner discrimination against a female. It suggests that a male is always bright, intelligent, and a source of grace



and joy. Needless to say that many people in Yemen feel happy and proud when their wives deliver a male child.

The misogynistic attitude against women either in the culture of Yemen in particular or in the culture of the Arabic peninsula in general, is not a newborn phenomenon. Instead, it goes back in time and culture to the pre-Islamic era during which most men used to bury their baby daughters alive. In addition, going through the Holy Quran to read about the way people used to live their lives, we come to know that a father in some tribes in the Arabic Peninsula used to fall in deep sadness if he receives news that he gets a female child from his wife. The Holy Quran has vilified and denounced such type of people and has stated this issue in Sura 16: AN-NAHL (THE BEE) - Juz' 14 - Translation Qarib.

Allah the Almighty has stated; “when the good news of the birth of a female is given to any of them, his face grows dark and inwardly he chokes, (58)”. Because of the supposed evilness and bad omen of the bad news of a baby girl, the father hides from people; (pondering) whether he will keep her and be humiliated, or trample her into the dust. Evil is their judgment! (59). The appallingly disgraceful practice of burying baby girls alive in the Arabic cultural tradition persisted for quite a while until Islam strongly forbade it.

Thus, such proverbs seem to have carried out and perpetuated the same male attitude of discrimination and dominance over women though the verse from the Holy Quran has strongly condemned and unequivocally forbade. Such traditional proverbs perpetuate gender discrimination against women. As seen earlier, these proverbs strikingly welcome and glorify a male child’s arrival from the very beginning, and—to the contrary—degrade, dismiss and lessen a female child. From those proverbs, one can smell the deeply-rooted and entrenched cultural and social discrimination of males over females. Such proverbs also impart and very likely inscribe bias and prejudice against women in the mentality of male members as if it were a normality practice or necessity.

3- “*Kol makal alrejal wa kum kiam aljemal*”: (كل مأكّل الرجال وقم قيام الجمال), which literally means ‘eat like men and stand up like camels’.

This proverb, like some other Yemeni proverbs, shows the patriarchal state that is widely spread and practiced in the Yemeni society. It compares a man to a camel in strength, power, and thirst. In the eyes of those who believe in this proverb, man should eat too much to show enough strength, masochism and chivalry.

4- “*La takhaf ala Min khalf rejal*”: (لاتخف على من خلف رجال), which means ‘Do not feel pity or show sympathy upon a man who has left sons behind’.

This proverb states clearly that men are the only source of power, pride, honor, glory, and the like. If a man passed away and left his sons behind, these sons would be in the position of their father after death. On the contrary, the proverb carries a deeply discriminating meaning; it suggests that a man who passed away and left girls behind him, he is worthy to be felt sad upon and sympathized with. The father’s name will die away with him and he will be forgotten; the father of girls will not be glorified and mentioned among the people of the society due to the daughters that he left behind.

The proverb makes it clear that only sons are reliable to carry out responsibility and worthy to carry their father’s name. They could also defend their father’s legacy, keep safe his properties and preserve his heritage. If a father passed away and left behind daughters only, the daughters are not likely to carry their father’s name, unable to preserve his heritage; unworthy to honor them, carry their name or maintain their father’s property. Therefore, their father’s name is forgotten, his legacy vanishes and his property can be exposed to loss or pillage by others.

5- “*Mafish Marah tashokh min Altaqa*”: (ماfish مرة تشخ من الطاقة): i.e., ‘No woman can pee from a window’.

The current public proverb does not just—indirectly though—show a woman’s biological disability in comparison with a man. It rather goes deeper and farther in denoting that a woman cannot reach the status and position of a man, no matter what she does or how much she tries. While a man can pee from the window, a woman cannot. Biologically speaking, man has a penis and that indicates strength, superiority and privilege. A woman, in contrast, does not have one, which designates fragility, inferiority and an underprivileged status.

It is thus very amazing and tragic all at once to find that people in the community degrade a woman regarding her organs upon which neither the man nor the woman has the power to decide or control, let alone their existence. It is only the man’s self-indulgent attitude and self-centered mentality that would make out of his quirk being a social status of superiority over women and a right to discriminate. Based on such falsified perception and tenuous cultural attitude against women, the man rummages to find out any blemish in a woman and flaunts himself against her.

6- “*Etha mat akhook inkasar dhaharak witha matat ohktak istatrat awratk*”: (إذا مات اخوك انكسر ظهرك واذا ماتت اختك إستترت عورتك); i.e., ‘if your brother dies,



your back gets broken, you lose a supporting pillar to lean against and to back you up; but if your sister dies, your dignity, pride and honor are preserved’.

In brief, the Yemeni cultural heritage is fraught with so many popular, gender-discriminatory proverbs that show the superiority of masculine culture. Yemeni culture is replete with sayings and proverbs that raise the status of men in society and deepen the concept of male dominance among the members of society. Undoubtedly, it is not surprising that a society in which illiteracy is still commonly spread among its members still—possibly with pride—glorifies masculinity, degrades women, and considers males to be the center of all life affairs.

Consequently, the Yemeni proverbs do not suggest that a Yemeni woman is the one responsible for dedicating a negatively stereotypical image to herself. It is men, masculine culture and patriarchal philosophy that insist on establishing and perpetuating such image. It is also men who refuse to accept and take in women as an active category in society and in the field of social development as a whole. Hence, popular Yemeni proverbs of a gender-discrimination nature not only express and help perpetuate the inferior situation of women in the family and society, but also work to consecrate such social formation that has been consolidated and deeply rooted since ancient times. A woman is thought of and looked at as innately inferior, intrinsically less worthy and thus deserves a lower status and is to be allocated second, next to man.

5.2 Some Yemeni Proverbs that Show the Relationship between a Man and a Woman

Many Yemeni proverbs illustrate the nature of the relationship between man and woman in society. In almost all the proverbs that we have come across while reading some references for the current research paper, we could discernably find that women have been represented with a very passive image and designated a subaltern role that they have to play with men in everyday life and in all walks of it. The following proverbs will make this point very clear to a reader.

- 1- “Malilmarah elazojeha”: (مالي للمرأة الازوجها); which means ‘woman is fit for nothing but a husband’. This proverb confines a woman’s spectrum and horizon in life to a man, as a wife. It not only limits the span that a woman should have in life or determines her entire fate, but also assigns a woman to one role and one role only; to be a suitable and worthy wife. As this proverb suggests, a woman is not fit for education, politics, health science, economics, etc.; she is only fit for a husband. She was created only for sex,

giving babies, and taking care of children. The next proverb further supports this claim.

- 2- “*Ma lilmarah ella zoj aw alkabr*”: (ما للي مرة إلا زوج أو القبر); ‘woman has no choice in life, either her husband or the grave’.

Again, this proverb maintains that a woman has only two choices in life; she has either to be a wife or to be buried in a grave. The smell of arrogance and contempt against women is highly presented in these proverbs. They ignore and reject the role of women in society. From their point of view, a woman has no positive role to play in the community. There is a common say in Yemeni society that goes ‘a woman’s mind is in her knee’.

Again man claims that woman is of biological inability to have a positive role to play in the community. As a result, people in society treat a woman like an animal not a human being. In addition to being a wife, a woman can be convenient for housework like cooking, washing up, cleaning, etc. She also can take care of pets, collect wood and bring it on her head from different places, participate in agricultural work, and sometimes help in livelihood duties.

- 3- “*Mkaed alrijal tahed aljibal wa mkaed alnisaa tahed alrijal*”: (مكائد الرجال تهد (الجبال ومكائد النساء تهد الرجال); i.e., ‘men’s intrigues destroy mountains, and women’s intrigues undermine men’. Yet again, a woman in this proverb is projected with a very passive image compared to a man, even in terms of cunningness and conspiring. Women are thus visualized by men to be their adversary—inferior, weak and evil adversary nonetheless—and in almost all walks of life.

In any case, this and many other Yemeni proverbs consider that the man is the only one capable of responsibility and worthy of respect and glory, and not the woman as she is characterized by an inborn incapacity and a state of inferiority. Man is the right owner of property, the eligible occupant of authority, the worthy possessor of power, and even the authorized agent to prescribe and apply punishment. It would accordingly be easily visualized why our ancestors have persistently maintained such a male-dominated heritage through such related proverbs. They used to chant that ‘The horse is behind his imagination, and the woman is behind her men’. As for her divorce and her return to her family’s home, it is said that ‘a girl’s return to her parent’s house is heavier than lead.’ In terms of divorce, it is usually said that ‘if divorce is at the woman’s hands, life becomes a boring job’, and ‘a woman’s jealousy is the key to her divorce.’



5.3 Some Yemeni Proverbs that Insult and Dishonor a Woman

As an explicit incitement a Yemeni woman is exposed to and has to go through in her life, many Yemeni traditional proverbs persist feeding patriarchal-oriented discrimination and male-domination ideology against a woman. These proverbs devalue and degrade women in a very aggressive, inconsiderate and belittling manner. Such proverbs been embedded in people's minds so that women have become familiar with and perhaps accustomed to such degradation. Women could even be observed to have adapted an acquiescing strategy and come to terms with their periphery role in society.

Sometimes you come across women insulting some men saying that 'you are not a man, you are a woman'. The set of the following proverbs will show how such Yemeni proverbs abet and disdain women and their honor. These proverbs are as follows:

- 1- "Almarah Marah walo Tanmarah": (المرءة مرة ولو تنمرة) 'A woman is a woman even if she occurs to be like a tiger'.
- 2- "Mashorat almarah Kharab sannah": (مشورة المرءة خراب سنة); i.e. 'consulting a woman on any issue, will bring damage to you for a year'.
- 3- "Albint tajib ala'ar wa alado lildar": (البننت تجيب العار والعدو الى الدار); i.e. 'A girl brings disgrace and enemy to the door'.
- 4- "Alnisa Ras Albla'a walmasib": (النساء رأس البلاء والمصائب); i.e. 'women are the key source of evil and troubles'.
- 5- "La Tamn Almarah wain Halaft Ala Alma'a": (لا تأمن المرءة ولو حلفت على الماء); i.e. 'Do not believe a woman even if she swears on water'.
- 6- "La qiadah min marrah": (لاقيادة من مرءة); i.e. 'No leadership from a woman'.
- 7- "Alnisa Kholokna min Dhaila Awaaj": (النساء خلقن م ضلع اعوج); i.e. 'Women are created from a Curved Bone'.
- 8- "Monikesat Alamim wa Jalibat al-Masaib": (النساء منكسات العمائم وجلابات); i.e. 'They cause high heads to go down and bring evils'.
- 9- "Haiah min taht altibin wala zawjat alibn": (حية من تحت التبن ولازوجت الابن); i.e., 'you would rather have a serpent lying underneath your house hay than your son's wife'.
- 10- "Wald asi ahsan min asharah banat motiat": (ولد عاصي احسن من عشر بنات); i.e. 'a backslider boy is better than ten obedient girls'.

5.4 Proverbs that Glorify Women in the Yemeni Society

In her article, "Woman in the Yemeni public Proverbs" 2019, Belqis Mohammed Alwan stated that in a very vigorous attempt to search for some

Yemeni proverbs that present a positive image corresponding to the status, dignity and contribution of women to society throughout history, both urban and rural, the outcome was very disappointingly modest. After a stressful attempt, she could find only two proverbs that respect a woman. They are as follows;

- 1- “*Marah modaberah walaTijara min Aden*”: (مرأة مدبرة ولاتجارة من عدن); i.e., ‘A well-managing woman is better than a Trade from Aden’.

In this proverb, a woman was compared to the practice of the profession of trade coming from and originating in Aden. At the time of the British colonization of Aden that ended in 1967, the city was a trade hub and people from the northern part of Yemenis used to go there and trade many of their needed goods from Aden. In hat order, a good woman and wife who would well-manage the house necessities in a very economical way and satisfy her husband would rather be a far better privilege that Aden trade.

- 2- “*Albait Almarah wa alhabah aldhurah*”: (البيت المره والحبه الذرة); i.e., ‘what a home is if not a good woman and enough corn’.

The proverb suggests that a house is nothing but a good woman and caring wife. A house or home is upright only in the presence of such type of woman. It also indicates that among all whole wheat grains, corn sits on top. Hence, the availability of such type of woman and of corn is all what it takes to establish a blessed home. These two things are the two essentials of any house from the point of view of the proverb.

Although the two proverbs mentioned above are positive in terms of the image they present for women and the role they play, they do not transcend the materialistic, utilitarian view of women and their existence. The two proverbs imply that a woman is always used as a tool for a better man’s life. Consequently, the two proverbs have shortened and limited the woman’s spatial limit that she is supposed to be useful at the house only as a good wife. She is only assigned to manage the basics of life at home and to do the housework.

As Yemeni native researchers, we could maintain that the repressive attitude against Yemeni women is not accidentally born; instead, it is an indoctrination of a deeply-rooted and engrained cultural nature in society. The whole spectrum view of such male-domination, prejudiced discrimination and unfair treatment against Yemeni women can be attributed to many factors. Among the major factors bringing about and perpetuating such bias could be ignorance and/or misunderstanding of Islamic principles, and cultural heritage that people inherit from one generation to another. Despite lacking on many occasions sound reference



and credibility, these social norms have generated and maintained certain male cultural attitudes against Yemeni women, and have even become the principal background and value reference on which a Yemeni man relies to deal with a woman.

6. Concluding Remarks

Based on the literature review, it was clear that in many societies women are always humiliated and degraded. They suffer from gender discrimination that can be manifested clearly in popular proverbs of such human communities.

However, forms, types, and intensity of such discrimination-oriented proverbs vary from one human community to the other according to the level of progress that community has made, level of education of that community's women, and the duration of the patriarchy system within the family a woman is controlled by and has to operate within. Besides, it could be obvious by now that popular customs and traditions play a major role in perpetuating and reinforcing the concepts of discrimination against women in popular proverbs and ultimately in actual life.

In the Yemeni community, which is classified to be patriarchal, proverbs clearly manifest and feasibly encourage gender discrimination against women. Man is of A grade as a human being while woman is graded next. Man is bestowed with authority and superiority that he has given to himself on baseless grounds nonetheless. He happens to be privileged as a father, a husband, a family foster, an employer, a soldier, a singer, a politician, and so on and so forth. However, a woman is marginalized as she happens to be weaker, more fragile, and inferior. A woman is also branded with a wicked and evil nature, a parasitic existence, and is a symbol of negativity, shame, disgrace, incapability and the like.

In this regard, international associations, organizations and women unions that work in the field of feminism, equality, and equity may find in the current study an enlightening guide should they address the status of Yemeni women. On the hope that this work comes to light under the shadow of the civil war that has been ravaging Yemen for years; it is worth mentioning to note that women in Yemen have become the most grounded beings in the community. Some of them have lost their husbands, sons, fathers and other close or distant relatives. Some women in Yemen have become homeless, displaced, and exposed to violence and even sexual harassment during such prolonged ordeal.

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